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PROGRAM The Today Show STATION WRC-TV
NBC Network

DATE April 6, 1983 7:00 A.M. CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT Fighting in Nicaragua

BRYANT GUMBEL: As we've just heard in the news, there's been a lot about the fighting in Nicaragua lately, but little of what's happening to the people.

Free-lance journalist Jon Alpert joins us now. He returned to Nicaragua recently and revisited a couple of families.

JON ALPERT: Yeah. When we were there the last time, the country was in turmoil. And we were a little bit worried about, you know, what might have happened to these people. And four years is a long time. But it's almost like looking for a needle in a haystack.

Four years ago, right after the revolution, we filmed these scenes in the slums of Managua. Living in a shack was the Perez family. All the children were sick. And for months, the family had had no food.

[Speaks in Spanish] Do you have any meat?

WOMAN: No. [Speaks in Spanish]

ALPERT: [Speaks in Spanish] Potatoes? Vegetables?

WOMAN: No. [Speaks in Spanish]

ALPERT: This year, when we went back to visit Mrs. Perez, the house was gone.

[Speaks in Spanish] What happened to the people who lived here?

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[People speak in Spanish]

ALPERT: They moved over there, into the next neighborhood.

We've been looking for two days. We're never going to find it. This is ridiculous. Wait a minute.

[Speaks in Spanish] You remember me? Yeah?

[Conversation in Spanish]

ALPERT: This is your new house.

WOMAN: Ah-ha. Si.

ALPERT: It's nicer than the other one. [Speaks in Spanish] Yeah.

[Speaks in Spanish] Who gave you this land? The government gave you this land?

WOMAN: Si.

ALPERT: Did you have to pay?

WOMAN: No.

ALPERT: You're all alone with your six kids. Is this how you support them, by making tortillas?

WOMAN: Si.

ALPERT: Only this -- uh-huh -- making tortillas.

WOMAN: Si.

ALPERT: [Speaks in Spanish] You help your mother?

CHILD: Si.

ALPERT: Uh-huh. [Speaks in Spanish] Every day you help her?

CHILD: Si.

ALPERT: Uh-huh.

CHILD: [Speaks in Spanish]

ALPERT: And you and your sister go off and sell things

in the street every day.

CHILD: [Speaks in Spanish]

ALPERT: [Speaks in Spanish] Do you go to school?

CHILD: No.

ALPERT: No?

CHILD: No.

ALPERT: [Speaks in Spanish] How old are you?

CHILD: [Speaks in Spanish]

ALPERT: Eleven? [Speaks in Spanish] You're supposed to go to school. [Speaks in Spanish]

[Speaks in Spanish] You buy tortillas from them every day? Uh-huh. And it makes you strong, huh?

What do you like? [Speaks in Spanish]

CHILD: [Speaks in Spanish]

ALPERT: You like that doll. [Speaks in Spanish]

CHILD: Si.

ALPERT: Do you think one day you can get it? [Speaks in Spanish]

CHILD: No.

ALPERT: You don't think you're ever going to get it? [Speaks in Spanish]

CHILD: [Speaks in Spanish]

ALPERT: You like it, but you don't have any money.

Four years ago we also filmed the family of Cesar Avillez, a wealthy engineer. His wife showed us photos taken on their extensive land holdings.

How many farms and houses did your family have?

MRS. AVILLEZ: About ten.

ALPERT: About ten?

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WOMAN: Yes.

ALPERT: Cesar swore that he would never leave Nicaragua.

CESAR AVILLENZ: Why should I leave my country?

ALPERT: You're not scared about what's going to happen?

AVILLENZ: No, no, sir. Why? You have to work.

ALPERT: This year we returned to the suburb where Cesar lived. It was easy to find his house, and there was a car parked in the driveway.

[Speaks in Spanish] Do you know who he is? No?

MAN: No.

ALPERT: Who owns the house now? [Speaks in Spanish]
Who owns the house now?

[Speaks in Spanish]

ALPERT: The Housing Ministry? Uh-huh. They took back the house?

MAN: Think so.

ALPERT: You think so?

MAN: Yeah.

ALPERT: He must have left the country.

Most of all, we wanted to find a boy named Mario. His hand had been blown off by a mine. We went back to the hospital to see if he was still alive.

WOMAN: [Speaks in Spanish]

ALPERT: He lives over by the park someplace?

Do you remember me?

[Conversation in Spanish]

ALPERT: He was all bandaged up. Right?

WOMAN: Si.

ALPERT: And he was in your arms. [Speaks in Spanish] You put him on the floor and he went [makes crying sound]. You were crying, weren't you?

[Speaks in Spanish] What would you like when you get big? You want to be a baseball player? Yeah?

[Speaks in Spanish] Does he like school?

WOMAN: [Speaks in Spanish]

ALPERT: He doesn't want to go?

WOMAN: [Speaks in Spanish]

ALPERT: He only wants to play baseball and play with his friends?

WOMAN: [Speaks in Spanish]

ALPERT: Go get 'em, Mario.

GUMBEL: Jon, let's talk about a bottom line. The answer is obvious for the man who was once wealthy and who you couldn't find the second time around. But for the others, better or worse off now than before?

ALPERT: Well, that particular family was still real poor, but they had land. It was the first time they ever owned any land. And it's a significant difference in their lives. I think it's going to be years before we're really going to see that family, you know, lift themselves up and be real strong. But the real poor people are better off.

GUMBEL: Do they have any chance of lifting themselves up and being real strong? I mean you asked the one girl [Speaks in Spanish], did she go to school, and she said no.

ALPERT: Right. We asked about that. And actually, while we were there, there's like a neighborhood coordinator came by and really scolded this woman for not signing the kid up for school. Evidently, the school was there and the mother...

GUMBEL: But they just hadn't signed up. So it was available.

ALPERT: It was available, but the mother needed the income and she couldn't afford to send the kid to school. Boy, did that government official scold her.

GUMBEL: Going to go back in four more years?

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ALPERT: We'll see. I hope it's better off. You know, it's still in turmoil, and it's real sad that they're still fighting down there.

GUMBEL: John Alpert, thank you.